



The Fallout from the Financial Crisis (5): The End of Public Support for Development Aid?

by Robert Zimmerman

- ◆ Public support for development aid remains high despite the financial crisis.
- ◆ Over the past 20 years, public attitudes towards aid in OECD countries have remained steadily positive throughout economic ups and downs.
- ◆ Politicians can continue to count on the support of taxpayers to keep their commitment to increase aid.

World leaders met in Doha at the end of November for the International Conference on Financing for Development, but many politicians will be wondering if they can afford to send taxpayer's money abroad when the financial crisis is starting to affect the real economy. Already, the first signs of an aid slowdown are becoming apparent with the French and Italian scaling-up efforts under pressure.

At the same time, polling data shows that voters continue to strongly support aid to developing countries, despite the financial crisis.

In July 2008, a year into the crisis, but before news about it came to dominate the front pages of the general press, 69 per cent of French people "agreed" or "completely agreed" that "it is normal that France helps developing countries, even if it runs into budgetary problems"¹. One year earlier, in June 2007, at the very start of the crisis, this percentage was 64 per cent². Even with more news about the scale and depth of the crisis, French people continue to support helping developing countries.

In the same poll of July 2008, French people were asked about the budget for development co-operation. Respondents were first informed about the current aid budget (in Euros), the aid budget per capita, the defence budget per capita and the education and research budget per capita. Respondents were then asked if the aid budget to developing countries should be raised, maintained or reduced. In total, 79 per cent of French people say the budget should be increased or maintained. In late October 2008, after two months of headline news about the financial crisis in all news media, 76 per cent of French people said that "Europe should maintain or increase its aid to developing countries in the context of the financial

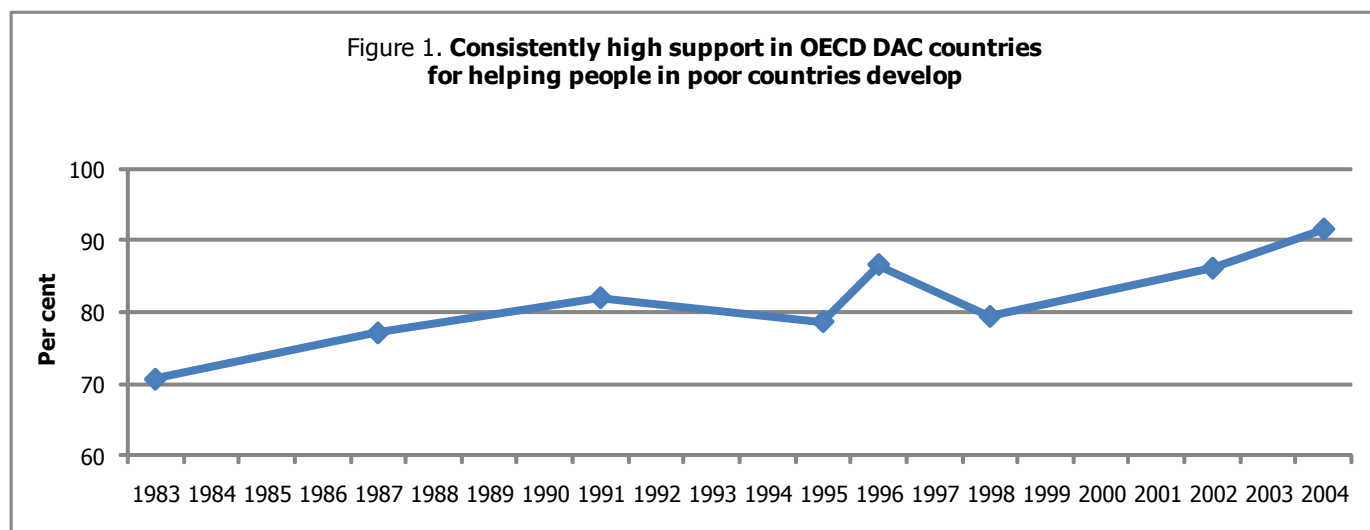
crisis"³. Even though the question was slightly different, an overwhelming majority of people continued to support the same or a higher development aid budget but there was a move from support for increasing aid towards maintaining it steady. The percentage with no opinion dropped into insignificance (2 per cent). Though support for decreasing aid rose in the later poll from 14 to 22 per cent, the overall level of support remains high, even if people seem more cautious.

The French case compared to other OECD countries

These poll results are currently only available for France, but public opinion results have shown to be remarkably consistent across OECD countries. For example, in 2004, support for development aid in European Development Assistance Committee countries ranged from very high (86 per cent) in Belgium to extremely high (97 per cent) in Denmark, with all other countries in between. Until more data becomes available from other countries we will have to be cautious about inferences, but based on previous results we can expect to find similar levels of public support for development in other OECD countries.

1. *Les Français et l'aide au développement* - Edition 2008 -. IFOP pour l'Agence Française de Développement. Available at: www.afd.fr/jahia/webdav/site/afd/users/administrateur/public/communiqués/AFD-Ifop-confdepresse-231008.pdf
2. *Les Français et l'aide au développement* - Edition 2007 -. IFOP pour l'Agence Française de Développement. www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/IMG/pdf/AFD.pdf
3. *Les Français et la place de l'Europe dans le monde*. L'institut CSA pour Coordination Sud et Paroles D'européens. Available at: www.coordinationsud.org/IMG/pdf/Sondage_Les_Francais_et_la_place_de_l_Europe_dans_le_monde-3.pdf

Figure 1. Consistently high support in OECD DAC countries for helping people in poor countries develop



Average OECD DAC country percentage of people who say it is (very) important to "help people in poor countries develop".

Source: Eurobarometer and national surveys for non-EU countries, available at www.oecd.org/dev/devcom

The figures from France show that the popularity of development assistance remains high in the context of the economic crisis. Could this be because people realise that if the economic situation of the rich countries in a global financial crisis is dire, the economic position of poor people in developing countries is even worse? Whatever the reason, public support for development has been consistently high across OECD countries over the past 20 years (see Figure above). Support has never dropped below 70 per cent and reached 90 per cent in many European countries in 2004. The overall trend of support is rising, despite economic fluctuations.

The evidence demonstrates that public support for development aid is high, and it has remained high for the past two decades. Politicians looking for an "easy" cut in their budgets may want to think twice. First, the high support for development aid is reflected in a well organised global civil society that will resist breaches of donor commitments for more and better aid. Indeed, in leaner times, attitudes seem to be more charitable, and redistribution more popular. Second, in times of a global financial crisis, poor people in developing countries need development assistance more than ever. Taxpayers seem to realise this. Their policy makers must realise it, too.